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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0149
RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000666

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: ANTI-ARROYO FERVOR FIZZLES

REF: A. MANILA 521 (PROTESTS LACK CRITICAL MASS)

[1](#)B. MANILA 517 (MANILA BRACES FOR ANOTHER DEMONSTRATION)
[1](#)C. MANILA 483 (BRIBERY ALLEGATIONS ROIL ADMINISTRATION)
[1](#)D. MANILA 316 (HOUSE SPEAKER OUSTED)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As corruption allegations against the Arroyo Administration persist, the general public appears increasingly uninspired about prospects for removing President Arroyo from office before 2010. The February 25 and 29 anti-Arroyo rallies in the streets of Metro Manila failed to attract crowds or fervor in any way comparable to the events that brought down former Presidents Marcos or Estrada (ref A and B). As this mostly Catholic country prepares for Easter and as students leave university campuses for summer recess, the opportunity for mass demonstrations against Arroyo diminishes accordingly. Organizers of a March 14 "rally for truth" in Manila openly admitted that they did not expect large crowds - another sign of "people power" fatigue. The House and Senate recessed on March 12 for the Easter holidays, further mitigating political noise against the administration. President Arroyo appears poised to serve out her term until 2010. END SUMMARY.

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS UNAVAILABLE FOR PROTESTS

[1](#)2. (U) During the March 11 ceremony for the signing of the national budget, President Arroyo noted that "people are tired of the politics of division and despair" -- a warning to the opposition to recognize that she fully intends to stay in power until 2010. While the opposition continued to plan anti-Arroyo demonstrations, including a "rally for truth" in Manila on March 14, its ability to attract demonstrators has been severely hampered by factors outside their control, including the Easter holidays, when many Metro Manila residents return to their home provinces. University students in Metro Manila, who have turned out in large numbers for the recent rallies, are now preparing for final examinations and summer holidays. Manila's largest universities, including University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila, De La Salle University, and University of Santo Tomas, will recess for over two months beginning in the middle of March.

CONGRESS BREAKS FROM ITS INVESTIGATIONS

[1](#)3. (SBU) Both houses of Congress adjourned on March 12 and will not resume sessions until April 21. While congressional committees are allowed to hold hearings during recess, the Senate committees investigating the ZTE national broadband network controversy (ref C) have not decided when formal inquiries will resume. While the calls for Arroyo's resignation may continue for months to come, opposition leaders will probably not garner any support or momentum until October, at the earliest, when the House can file another impeachment complaint against the President. The Constitution

prohibits the filing of more than one impeachment complaint against the same official within a one-year period; President Arroyo has survived three impeachment attempts so far, the most recent in October 2007.

OUTSIDE MANILA, ARROYO REMAINS STRONG

¶4. (SBU) While political and business elites in Metro Manila remain enthralled with the latest turn of events in the corruption scandals, local and regional leaders throughout the country have expressed -- in separate visits to Malacanang Presidential Palace and in manifestos published in national newspapers -- their continued support for President Arroyo to serve out her term until ¶2010. The Union of Local Authorities, the League of Provinces, the League of Cities, the League of Municipalities, the Vice Governors League, the Philippine Councilors League, and the Provincial Board Members League have all lauded the President's strong economic leadership and rejected what some regional leaders have called "the tyranny of imperial Manila."

THE CHURCH: RESTRAINED BUT INFLUENTIAL

¶5. (SBU) While some critics have argued that the Catholic Church's political relevance has waned in recent years, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines continues to demonstrate its influential force in the inner circles of government. While unwilling to call for Arroyo's resignation amidst the recent scandals, the Catholic Bishops were able to quietly convince President Arroyo to revoke a controversial executive order that prohibited executive branch officials from testifying in Congress without prior approval from the President. The order's revocation paves the way for government officials to appear before the Senate and testify about the ZTE scandal.

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SECURITY FORCES REMAIN LOYAL

¶6. (SBU) During a March 13 breakfast with the Ambassador, Philippine Chief of the Armed Forces General Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., said that he was "proud" of the conduct of the military and police during the recent protests. Esperon noted that the security forces had turned a critical corner in their ability to handle large demonstrations without incident. Although the police were under tremendous pressure during the recent demonstrations, Esperon emphasized that the demonstrations remained peaceful, and the police and military upheld their responsibility to ensure public order. Despite media rumors that the military could act extra-constitutionally to oust the President, Esperon said responsible decisionmakers knew better, citing prominent members of the business community who had called to offer their support during the rallies and to compliment the exemplary behavior of the police and military.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) As churchgoers prepare for Easter, students leave university campuses for summer recess, and Congress takes a five-week break, the opportunity for mass demonstrations against Arroyo will likely dissipate for the near future. The general public outside of Metro Manila appears largely nonplussed by the latest corruption allegations or the continued calls for the President's resignation. While the scandals may dominate headlines of Metro Manila's newspapers for weeks to come, the upcoming March 15 match of national boxing hero Manny Pacquiao will be everyone's dinner-table conversation, not the fate of Arroyo. The President appears to have staved off yet another round of attacks by her detractors and critics, and seems poised to serve out her term until ¶2010.

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